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DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/C, INR, DRL, DS/IP/AF, DS/IP/ITA;  
LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICAWATCHERS

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SUBJECT: CHAD: FRENCH AMBASSADOR ON A COORDINATED APPROACH  
TO DEBY

REF: NDJAMENA 296

Classified By: P/E officer Haywood Rankin for reasons 4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: French Ambassador Bercot, saying he had been authorized by Paris to brainstorm with the Ambassador, volunteered a scenario March 3 (uncleared by his government), in which the U.S. and France would support and facilitate a graceful exit for President Deby. Under this scenario, U.S./France would accept Deby's expected win in the upcoming May 3 presidential elections. Deby would be given full respect, including calls on Presidents Bush and Chirac and high-profile international travel opportunities. In return, he would commit to resigning within one year, or two years at the most, and permit a major donor-driven restructuring of Chadian government institutions. Bercot had learned that the U.S. planned to send a senior official soon to Ndjamena. Such a visit, he said, would be a fiasco if Washington and Paris did not carefully coordinate in advance, and such coordination would take some time. Bercot acknowledged that Deby was a frail reed, but Deby was the only game in town. France strongly wanted the next leader to be a Christian southerner, but there were no good such candidates at present. End Summary.

12. (C) French Ambassador Jean-Pierre Bercot paid a call on the Ambassador March 3. He said that his government had authorized him to brainstorm with the Ambassador about how to proceed, with the presidential elections now scheduled for May 3. He understood that a senior U.S. official was considering making a visit to Ndjamena. It would, he said, be a fiasco if Paris and Washington did not carefully coordinate their positions well in advance of such a visit.

13. (C) Bercot first gave vent to umbrage over Deby's relative Tom Erdimi, living now in the U.S. The French Embassy in Washington had learned from the Department that Tom wanted to be in touch with the French to "explain what was really going on in Chad." Bercot said that the implication of Tom's message was that France was not informed, which was not the best way for Tom to ingratiate himself. In fact, France knew very well all about the Erdimi twins and their ilk. For 15 years these Zaghawan relatives had been at the heart of the Deby regime, ruling over the

cotton and oil sectors. They were responsible for the "Zaghawa monster" that strangled Deby himself. Bercot said he had been frank with Deby that these Zaghawans had ruined Chad and that Deby would be the last Zaghawan leader of the country.

14. (C) Bercot said that he and his predecessor had told Deby that France would not maintain a permanent troop presence in Chad and that the relationship of the past 30 years would have to change. Chad was a good training ground for troops, but France did not have a significant economic interest in Chad. For a number of years in the 1990s France had backed away from Deby. But concern about Libyan ambitions and the onset of the Darfur crisis in 2003 had altered France's present calculations. Darfur and Libya aside, it made no sense for France to make greater outlays in Chad than in Cameroon, double now those in Mali and Niger together, with the only French Sahelian troop presence being Chad. But the specter now was that Darfur would spill over into Chad and from thence westward to the Atlantic and southward to the Great Lakes. France had placed great hope on John Garang as the key to resolving Darfur, but with his death that crisis was continually worsening. Qadhafi sought to turn Chad into a vassal with the desert North (not just Aozou) being a Libyan-dominated buffer zone. Iran and Saudi Arabia were eager and active in spreading their creeds in the region.

15. (C) France for some years, Bercot said, had strongly favored replacement of Deby with a southern Christian. After a quarter century of disastrous rule from the Muslim North (note: following nearly two decades of disastrous rule from the South), the much more populous South deserved the chance again to try to make something of the country. However, the

opposition leaders from the South were a feckless lot. The French government had gone to great lengths to talk to them, send them to Paris, make them understand how to be effective, but all to no good. Each had a single-minded view of being handed the presidential palace on a silver platter and refused to agree among themselves on one opposition candidate. In fact, the only opposition figure with the necessary stature and nation-wide respect was the elderly Lol Mahamat Choua from north of Lake Chad, a northerner and a Muslim but at least not from the discredited far North or East. Perhaps, Bercot said, the U.S. and France, in the arrangements they might make with Deby behind the scenes, could pick Lol out of the pack and push him forward as Deby's transitional replacement. Bercot said he had also looked at some promising figures from within the ruling party (e.g., former Prime Minister Yamassoun Nagoum; David Houdeingar, president of the constitutional court; Rakis Manany, head of the national insurance company; and the Mayor of Ndjamena) but had not got far with promoting any of them. As soon as there was the faintest whiff that someone was raising his head too far, Deby and his henchmen swept him to the side.

16. (C) Bercot said that he had seen Deby the previous day (March 2), in the lead-up to the third congress of the ruling party (at the last minute deferred a day to March 4). Deby told him he would go from the congress to Abeche ("to be present prior to the next attacks from the Chadian rebels," Bercot commented, adding that if Deby stayed in Ache, it would be a worrisome sign). Bercot said that Deby was turning inward. He was consumed with the realization that people in his own tribe even his own clan, were preparing for his overthrow and death. Bercot claimed that Deby perceived that the Darfurian Zaghawan rebel leaders Mini Minawi and Khalil Ibrahim were scheming against him with members of his own clan, encouraged by the support provided to the Zaghawan rebels by the United States. Deby said that Qadhafi had told him that these Zaghawans from both sides of the Sudanese border had a vision of a Zaghawan "free zone" where they would hold full sway, and Deby had not been comforted when Qadhafi assured him that he would stand by him. Bercot said that he had urged Deby not to fret about these relatives who had fled into exile and not to forgive them if they came back begging. The reason they had fled was

that Deby had cut off their stipends. It was a good thing to see these vultures depart, he had told Deby.

17. (C) Bercot asked the Ambassador if the U.S. had a person in mind to replace Deby. The Ambassador said it was for Chadians to make such a choice; it was necessary to work for a process by which a replacement would be chosen credibly. Bercot said it was late to be talking about instituting a process, with elections due on May 3. The French, he said, had been trying for months, indeed years, to get fellow European governments to take a serious interest in Chad, its development generally and its flawed political system in particular, but the response had been lack of interest and an instant reflex to leave the costs and burdens to France. UNDP had put forward a plan to overhaul the electoral system but no one had wanted to finance it. Now suddenly Chad was on the front pages and there was a discovery of Chad's existence. The Ambassador agreed that it would have been much better to have mounted the process to change the system years ago, but it had not happened, and it was necessary to talk about what needed to be done now. The Ambassador said that if nothing were done at last to begin the necessary changes and if the May 3 election went forward, he would be forced to recommend to Washington to announce that the U.S. could not endorse the results of the election.

18. (C) Bercot described this approach as counterproductive. Deby could live without the United States. Deby saw that he had no respect from the United States; he even believed that the United States was actively working against him through his Zaghawan competitors. The American oil companies would want to maintain their involvement whatever the position of the American government. Deby had met all the strict legalities in the referendum that had changed the constitution and allowed him to run for a third term. The

constitution and legal correctness required that there be an election now. The international community had accepted such constitutional changes in many African countries -- most recently Uganda where the changes were more illegitimate than in the others (Burkina Faso, Gabon, Togo, Cameroon).

19. (C) Bercot said that Deby was a warrior, not a sophisticated politician. There was much that outsiders would not be able to understand about him, especially family dynamics, but it was clear that honor played an important role for him. He had become more and more hardened within himself with family desertions and lack of respect from the outside world, so he saw less and less need to make an effort to seduce the outside world. His poor state of health was having its effect on his mentality, as was his deteriorated relationship with president Bashir. It was in this beleaguered frame of mind that he had mismanaged the relationship with the World Bank. In the last months, Deby's authority had been weakened, but it remained enough for him to be able to hold on to power. He was the only one on the scene that could keep the country from falling into chaos.

10. (C) Pushed by Ambassador Wall to focus on a transition and a process which would prevent chaos, Bercot mused that the time was ripe now, with Deby balanced between weakness and over-confidence, to approach him with an arrangement by which he would agree to leave the scene in one year, or two years at the most. Essential to such an arrangement, continued Bercot, would be to offer him respect, to play to his sense of honor. He would need to be invited to Washington, to Paris, and to other important capitals. He would need to be received at the highest levels, nothing less than by Presidents Bush and Chirac. This plan would be expensive, new carrots would have to be offered to Chad. France had already done so much, even while realizing that the money it had thus far poured into Chad had been like water poured on sand, because of prevailing fear and corruption throughout the country. France would be prepared to do more, despite its prior great investment, but only if there were a prospect of a new system being put into place; otherwise, France was all too ready to withdraw.

¶11. (C) Ambassador Wall said that it would be difficult to contemplate an invitation for Deby to Washington in the climate of a presidential election that was patently non-credible. However, he said, this might be more palatable if Deby committed up front to resign within a year or two and began at once to reform the electoral process, even if he were assured of winning May 3. Bercot stated that Deby would only do this if he saw that the U.S. and France were working with him not against him. We would tell him that we did not see the May 3 election as correct, but that we would support him in triumph as "the president who brought democracy to Chad," on condition of his resignation. Bercot added that it would be necessary to take charge, behind the scenes, of reforming the political process and government institutions dealing with finance and security. Bercot emphasized the importance of a multi-ethnic approach to reform, a la Bosnia. France would have its particular role in bringing the Europeans along, for financial support. External players would have to be very cautious not to appear to be in control, else stir up nationalism. However Bercot cautioned that he could not be sure that Deby would make a firm commitment to resign. We would have to wrap the package deal in "beautiful paper." The prospect of failure was significant -- indeed the chances of Deby being killed or of dying of ill health were high. The result of his precipitate death or our failure to work out his staged, graceful departure would be chaos in Chad and, all too likely, throughout the region.

¶12. (C) Bercot said, on the issue of Washington's plan to send an official to hold discussions with Deby, that careful coordination of our positions in advance of such a visit would require some time, perhaps two to three months. If the United States made a proposal to Deby which was a shock to him, he could be expected immediately to ask what France's position was, and France would need to have an exact answer.

He had more confidence that he knew what Europe and France thought of him, confidence that French troops were a boost for him in his competition with the Zaghawans (who "are a little afraid" of a French military reaction), confidence that France wanted the best for Chad. Bercot did not think that the EU and UNDP should be brought in to this discussion at this juncture.

¶13. (C) Bercot said that he had been authorized to brainstorm in general and he had not shared his exact thinking with Paris. He emphasized that France's commitment to Chad did not extend past Deby. He suggested that he and Ambassador Wall and a representative from the State Department meet with Quai Africa in Paris to coordinate strategy.

Comment

¶14. (C) We note that this is the first time that Ambassador Bercot has talked through a transition strategy with us. End comment.  
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